Life as a Kid in 1965

By: Dale C. Maley
For: Fairbury Blade newspaper
Date: May 17, 2021

The 1960s were an excellent time to grow up as a kid in Fairbury. In that era, most small towns struggled with accommodating the largest generational group in U.S. history, the Baby Boomers.

So many children were entering the Fairbury school system that the local schools ran out of kindergarten classroom space. Many Fairbury children attended kindergarten in local churches because there was not enough classroom space.

To start the 1960s, the North Side children attended Isaac Walton grade school. The South Siders attended Edison grade school. One of the most favorite memories of attending grade school in these two aging buildings was going down the exterior fire escape for fire drills.

The Fairbury School Board was faced with surging enrollment and two old buildings that had outlived their useful lives. So the Board decided to shut down both old grade schools and send the children to the new Westview School on south First Street.

On the last day of school before the summer break, grade school classes would pack a sack lunch and walk to Marsh Park. It was the only park in Fairbury with playground equipment at that time.

Once school was out for the summer months, many children spent their time at the Fairbury swimming pool. The first swimming pool was built in 1958. In 1965 it was only seven years old. The Red Cross sponsored swimming lessons for the youth of Fairbury. This first swimming pool had a gravel parking lot, and the vending machines were in a lean-to building on the west side of the pool.

The field for little league baseball was located in the southeast corner of the fairgrounds. Teams were named after local businesses, including Walton's and the Tastee-Freeze. There was a concession stand by the old baseball field. After Westview was built, the baseball field was moved from the fairgrounds to the new school. After games played at the Westview field, the players would walk north a few blocks to get a cold treat at the Tasty-Freeze. A Cherry Coke was 10 cents plus five cents for the cherry flavoring.

During the summer months, farm kids would help out on their farm and their neighbors' farms. For example, they would walk the bean fields and pull any weeds. Kids would also help bale hay in the fields and then load and stack it in the barn. In addition, farm kids and some city kids would de-tassel corn in local areas.

In 1965, there were only three grocery stores in Fairbury. These were Dave's Supermarket, IGA, and Simmie's. Fairbury children's parents often instructed them not to cross the "Hard Road," or Route 24, because all the traffic made it dangerous to cross.

From a child's perspective, there were many significant buildings and stores on Locust Street. The most colorful building was the Honegger corporate office building with its distinctive red and white company colors. The new Fairbury City Hall now occupies this location.

There were two Laundromats in Fairbury in those times. One of them was located at the southwest corner of First and Locust Streets. Miniature boxes of Tide laundry detergent were sold in the Laundromat vending machines. The other Laundromat was owned by the Zimmerman's at the northeast corner of Second and Locust Streets.

If you were a young man fascinated by tools, the two best hardware stores in Fairbury were Zimmerman's and the tool department in Walton's. Many children found it challenging to wrap their Christmas gifts. If you bought your gift at Walton's, these amazing ladies would super efficiently wrap your item for you right before your eyes.

A favorite store of many children was Ben Franklin's five and ten cent store. They carried a large inventory of games and crafts for children. These included balsa airplanes, model kits, puzzles, and sports accessories.

Another iconic store was the Grey Goose run by Royce and Aldine Carter. There was no rural Pantagraph delivery on Sundays, so farm families would stop at this store to get the Sunday paper. Families would often send the kids into the Grey Goose to get the newspaper, and each child was given 10 cents to buy some candy in that store.

Some parents would take their children to the bank to start a savings account. The bank always had some free candy for the children visiting the bank.

Next to the bank was the Fairbury Paint Store. They carried every imaginable type of painting accessories and wallpaper. Jack Tollensdorf kept some free candy for the kids in the old cabinet left from the previous Bon Ton Limits drug store.

Central Park, now Veterans Memorial Park, had a brick water fountain. Some mischievous Fairbury youths would dump some of those little Tide boxes from the Laundromat vending machine into the fountain. Many times that fountain made mountains of bubbles in that park.

One of the Fairbury barbers who cut children's hair was Bert Moulton. His shop was across the street from Sunken Park. He kept a good stock of comic books for the kids to read while waiting for their haircut. Debbie Kaye's Salon now occupies this building.

At the northwest corner of Locust and Fifth Streets was the Loyola Theater. Many children watched Saturday matinee movies at this theater.

The Fairbury Fair brought a close to the summer for Fairbury children. The round concrete water fountain donated by C. B. Day had water fountains at just the right height for children to get a drink on a hot summer day. At the stock car races, the Boy Scouts would sell popcorn and soft drinks as a fundraiser.

Shortly after school started, there were hayrack rides in the autumn months. Besides school activities, there were not many outdoor events in the winter months. Many children went sledding on Shaft Hill next to the railroad tracks by Ninth Street. Some children ice skated on the Munz sandpit, Indian Creek, or on the Vermilion River.

Fairbury kids managed to have fun in the 1960s without cell phones, cable TV, or the Internet. Fairbury was a great small town to grow up in that era.

Water fountain in Central Park in 1965